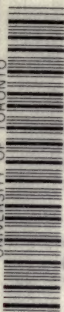


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Nicols, Robert Malise Bowyer
The assault and other
war poems from "Ardours and
endurances"

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THE ASSAULT



And other War Poems from
HARDSHIPS AND ENDURANCES"
BY
ROBERT NICHOLS

"The finest of all our Soldier Poets."

—*Sunday Times*.

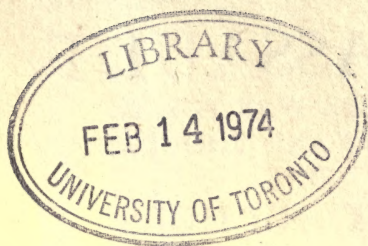
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THE ASSAULT
AND OTHER WAR POEMS
FROM "ARDOURS AND ENDURANCES"
BY
ROBERT NICHOLS

LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS
1918



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INTRODUCTION.

I HAVE been accused in print, in conversation, in letters signed and unsigned, of "militarism." It is said by those too lazy or too stupid to understand me, and by those who misinterpret for their own ends another's works, that I glorify war. I can forgive those who care so little for anything that they cannot be bothered with another's attempt at truth, but I cannot forgive those who wilfully misinterpret me. Fliers in the face of truth, perjurers, I do not praise war ; I glorify not those who make war, but those who endure it ; not those vices which lead to it, but those virtues which it rediscovers ! Think. Consider my generation. Am I likely to love war, more particularly this war ? Which generation has been most swept away ? Those young men who were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-six when the sword was drawn. Do I not belong to that generation ? Go you and call in the streets of the universities, citadels

of ghosts. Have I not reason to love war?
Answer.

Ah! but I praise the soldier, "the hired murderer." Fanatics of the easy and the ignoble, spiritless apostles of a peace you, at least, enriched by no exalted work, you do not know the soldier! You were never in touch with him. You had misread Mr. Kipling or, alternatively, you had misread Mr. Blatchford. Truly it was all the same to you. You wished to strike the soldier. You did not even know him enough to realize that neither writer represented the whole soldier of the immediate pre-war days. However, whether you reviled or pitied what you considered to be the soldier, you were as wrong then as you are wrong now. If you had really known aught of the army, you would have known this: that the hectoring spirit of domination, the desire for use of the army in political expression, was as absent among the general run of officers as disgruntled insubordination was in the ranks. The army isn't the place to find either of those sorts of thing. I dare you to say that there existed or that there was in process of forming an officers class in the sense that the Germans possessed, and still possess, an officer class. The British Army thinks by regiments, not by rank. But it is of little use to tell you this.

It is a thing of the spirit, a sort of disciplined spirit not in your line. Mercenary as many of you are, you cannot understand the pride of mercenaries.

But I will speak to you of that which you ought to understand : the relation of the servant to the State, that State of which you are ever prating, more particularly with regard to what the State will do for you, not you for the State. Renunciation is the soldier's first, as often, alas ! it is his final act : when he yields that devoted life which you neither understood nor honoured.

The soldier is anonymous. He expresses only the will of the State. He has no voice. Therefore you infer he does not think. How do you know ? You say he does not feel, that peace-time soldiering has a brutalizing influence. How do you know ? The soldier is anonymous. Moreover, he has a settled creed. That is another matter you do not understand—you in whom all creeds, all passions, both good and bad, at one time or another succeed ; you whose pride it is to possess an open mind. Quite simply our creed is the stoic creed, a creed not suited to you who would lead the crowd, not endure with it. Little-minded, you do not perceive that the crowd understands us, though you do not. Why ? Because their part, like ours, is

to be all their lives anonymous, more anonymous than we, since scarcely can they realize any independent aim in act, they whose chief lot it is, without opening their lips, to suffer and die. Go, therefore, to the tenements about which you so justly rave, learn from them our two virtues Silence and Fortitude.

But you, you coming generation, judge between us and your past leaders, not your Labour leaders, men of tenacity and patience, but those known to the old Greek and rediscovered in the present world as "Sophists." Judge between us and them. Aye, and scrap us, too, if we fail.

We are coming back: prevent us coming back only to demand our comfort, though we deserve it, for we are tired. Join in becoming young soldiers in the liberation war of humanity. For even as you shall refresh us and strengthen us spiritually and mentally—our numbers are not, after all, so many—so we shall teach you wherein to-be-a-soldier consists. We would help you to lose fickleness and that habit of pride in your ability to strike a balance of justice which so often masquerades as generosity. For you are ever making the devil too much of a gentleman. You have not learned that the truest justice is ever a fraction on the side of the angels. Come, we need your cleverness.

Learn from us the habit of the soldier's chastened and steadfast spirit.

Finally, to certain of you other poets, I ask you once again to remember your gift is not for use for your pleasure, for an aid to the realization of your personal ambition or even for your spiritual comfort. Take the risk, which I think some of you are overlong in reckoning, of being half-poets: you will, at any rate, be whole men. But I do not believe you will lose. Enter the pit. Dare to live, to be cooped, to be jostled by men, of whom, though you be angel, you are one. You write, so many of you, beautifully. You string lovely cadences. Find now something to write about. Realize yourself in action; submit to the impact of events. Be shaped by the hammer, and with your hammer shape. Make yourself ready for the worst fortunes, whether they come or no. Where any fear lives in yourself, endeavour to outbrave it. Those whose suns and moons go out discover upon the darkness further and undreamed of stars.

In the past many of the greatest songs have been those of men of action, of men who submitted themselves to the full current of the time, who were not afraid or disdainful of the fight. What of the Greek poets in desperate battle against the Persians, or as citizens of state against state? What of Dante and the feudal

families ? What of the Elizabethan adventurers ? What of Wordsworth, who wished in his youth to be a leader of the French Revolution ?

Art comes from rich life and goes to enrich life. You may reply that there is a life all your own in your heart, a life which receives I know not what of comfort from the contemplation of skies and trees: what you call Nature or, following Meredith, Earth. But realize now that there is no less "Nature" inside your house than outside it. Your wooden table is as much "Nature" as your tree and my street full of straggling persons, whom you call falsified by the town, just as much Nature as your solitudes. Once I, too, knew your joy. I lost it. I now realize that those trees are fighting each for food and for light. Why, even my human brothers are often more merciful than that !

So much as mere suggestions on the question to those who truly seek ; but with regard to certain of you, I guess your immobility not to be that of a man intensely and inwardly alive, but to be that of the frightened-of-life, the shirker, the lazy, or the merely frozen.

As for you, reader, fear presents itself that this has been a very long introduction to a short book. If it has been forgive me, for, like all

true poets—and I dare sometimes to think of myself as one—I have so much to say and so little time to say it. If it has not been overlong, then I feel sure that it will have served to amplify the meaning of those poems sprung from action and reaction which you will find within.

ROBERT NICHOLS.

THE WESTERN FRONT,
January, 1918.

TO THE MEMORY OF MY TRUSTY AND
GALLANT FRIENDS: HAROLD STUART
GOUGH (*King's Royal Rifle Corps*) AND
RICHARD PINSENT (*the Worcester
Regiment*)

For what is life if measured by the space,
Not by the act ?”

BEN JONSON.

THE SUMMONS

I.—TO—

ASLEEP within the dearest hour of night
And, turning with the earth, I was aware
How suddenly the eastern curve was bright,
As when the sun arises from his lair.
But not the sun arose: it was thy hair
Shaken up heaven in tossing leagues of light.

Since then I know that neither night nor day
May I escape thee, O my heavenly hell !
Awake, in dreams, thou springest to waylay
And should I dare to die, I know full well
Whose voice would mock me in the mourning
 bell,
Whose face would greet me in hell's fiery way.

II.—THE PAST

How to escape the bondage of the past ?
I fly thee, yet my spirit finds no calms
Save when she deems her rocked within those
 arms
To which, from which she ne'er was caught or
 cast.

O sadness of a heart so spent in vain,
That drank its age's fuel in an hour:
For whom the whole world burning had not
 power
To quick with life the smouldered wick again !

III.—THE RECKONING

THE whole world burns, and with it burns my
flesh.

Arise, thou spirit spent by sterile tears;
Thine eyes were ardent once, thy looks were
fresh,

Thy brow shone bright amid thy shining peers.
Fame calls thee not, thou who hast vainly strayed
So far for her; nor Passion, who in the past
Gave thee her ghost to wed and to be paid;
Nor Love, whose anguish only learned to last.

Honour it is that calls: canst thou forget
Once thou wert strong? Listen; the solemn call
Sounds but this once again. Put by regret
For summons missed, or thou hast missed them
all.

Body is ready, Fortune pleased; O let
Not the poor Past cost the proud Future's fall.

FAREWELL TO PLACE
OF COMFORT

FAREWELL TO PLACE OF COMFORT

FOR the last time, maybe, upon the knoll
I stand. The eve is golden, languid, sad. . . .
Day like a tragic actor plays his rôle
To the last whispered word, and falls gold-clad.
I, too, take leave of all I ever had.

They shall not say I went with heavy heart:
Heavy I am, but soon I shall be free;
I love them all, but O I now depart
A little sadly, strangely, fearfully,
As one who goes to try a Mystery.

The bell is sounding down in Dedham Vale:
Be still, O bell ! too often standing here
When all the air was tremulous, fine, and pale,
Thy golden note so calm, so still, so clear,
Out of my stony heart has struck a tear.

And now tears are not mine. I have release
From all the former and the later pain;
Like the mid-sea I rock in boundless peace,
Soothed by the charity of the deep sea rain. . . .
Calm rain ! Calm sea ! Calm found, long sought
in vain.

O bronzen pines, evening of gold and blue,
Steep mellow slope, brimmed twilit pools below,
Hushed trees, still vale dissolving in the dew,
Farewell! Farewell! There is no more to do.
We have been happy. Happy now I go.

THE APPROACH

I.—IN THE GRASS: HALT BY ROADSIDE

IN my tired, helpless body
I feel my sunk heart ache;
But suddenly, loudly
The far, the great guns shake.

Is it sudden terror
Burdens my heart? My hand
Flies to my head. I listen . . .
And do not understand.

Is death so near, then?
From this blaze of light
Do I plunge suddenly
Into Vortex? Night?

Guns again! the quiet
Shakes at the vengeful voice. . . .
It is terrible pleasure.
I do not fear: I rejoice.

II.—THE DAY'S MARCH

THE battery grides and jingles,
Mile succeeds to mile;
Shaking the noonday sunshine,
The guns lunge out awhile,
And then are still awhile.

We amble along the highway;
The reeking, powdery dust
Ascends and cakes our faces
With a striped, sweaty crust.

Under the still sky's violet
The heat throbs on the air. . . .
The white road's dusty radiance
Assumes a dark glare.

With a head hot and heavy,
And eyes that cannot rest,
And a black heart burning
In a stifled breast,

I sit in the saddle,
I feel the road unroll,
And keep my senses straightened
Toward to-morrow's goal.

There, over unknown meadows
Which we must reach at last,
Day and night thunders
A black and chilly blast.

Heads forget heaviness,
Hearts forget spleen,
For by that mighty winnowing
Being is blown clean.

Light in the eyes again,
Strength in the hand,
A spirit dares, dies, forgives,
And can understand !

And, best ! Love comes back again
After grief and shame,
And along the wind of death
Throws a clean flame.

* * * *

The battery grides and jingles,
Mile succeeds to mile;
Suddenly battering the silence
The guns burst out awhile.

. . . .
I lift my head and smile.

III.—NEARER

NEARER and ever nearer. . . .
My body, tired but tense,
Hovers 'twixt vague pleasure
And tremulous confidence.

Arms to have and to use them
And a soul to be made
Worthy if not worthy;
If afraid, unafraid.

To endure for a little,
To endure and have done:
Men I love about me,
Over me the sun!

And should at last suddenly
Fly the speeding death,
The four great quarters of heaven
Receive this little breath.



BATTLE

I.—NOON

It is midday: the deep trench glares. . . .
A buzz and blaze of flies. . . .
The hot wind puffs the giddy airs. . . .
The great sun rakes the skies.

No sound in all the stagnant trench
Where forty standing men
Endure the sweat and grit and stench,
Like cattle in a pen.

Sometimes a sniper's bullet whirs
Or twangs the whining wire;
Sometimes a soldier sighs and stirs
As in hell's frying fire.

From out a high cool cloud descends
An aeroplane's far moan. . . .
The sun strikes down, the thin cloud
 rends . . .
The black speck travels on.

And sweating, dizzied, isolate
In the hot trench beneath,
We bide the next shrewd move of fate
Be it of life or death.

II.—NIGHT BOMBARDMENT

SOFTLY in the silence the evening rain
descends. . . .

The soft wind lifts the rain-mist, flurries it, and
spends

Its grief in mournful sighs, drifting from field
to field,

Soaking the draggled sprays which the low hedges
wield

As they labour in the wet and the load of the
wind.

The last light is dimming; night comes on
behind.

I hear no sound but the wind and the rain,
And trample of horses, loud and lost again
Where the waggons in the mist rumble dimly on
Bringing more shell.

The last gleam is gone.

It is not day or night; only the mists unroll
And blind with their sorrow the sight of my soul.

I hear the wind weeping in the hollow overhead :
She goes searching for the forgotten dead
Hidden in the hedges or trodden into muck
Under the trenches, or maybe limply stuck
Somewhere in the branches of a high lonely
tree—

He was a sniper once. They never found his
body.

I see the mist drifting. I hear the wind and rain,
And on my clammy face the oozed breath of the
slain

Seems to be blowing. Almost I have heard
In the shuddering drift the lost dead's last word :

Go home, go home, go to my house ;
Knock at the door, knock hard, arouse
My wife and the children—that you must do—
What do you say ?—Tell the children, too—
Knock at the door, knock hard, arouse
The living. Say: the dead won't come back to this
house.

O . . . but it's cold—I soak in the rain—
Shrapnel found me—I shan't come home again—
No, not home again !

The mourning voices trail
Away into rain, into darkness . . . the pale
Soughing of the night drifts on in between.

The Voices were as if the dead had never been.

O melancholy heavens, O melancholy fields,
The glad, full darkness grows complete and shields
Me from your appeal.

With a terrible delight
I hear far guns low like oxen at the night.
Flames disrupt the sky.

The work is begun.
“Action!” My guns crash, flame, rock and stun
Again and again. Soon the soughing night
Is loud with their clamour and leaps with their
light.

The imperative chorus rises sonorous and fell:
My heart glows lighted as by fires of hell.
Sharply I pass the terse orders down.
The guns blare and rock. The hissing rain is
blown
Athwart the hurtled shell that shrilling, shril-
ling goes
Away into the dark, to burst a cloud of rose
Over German trenches.

A pause: I stand and see
Lifting into the night like founts incessantly
The pistol-lights’ pale spores upon the glim-
mering air
Under them furrowed trenches empty, pallid,
bare
And rain snowing trenchward ghostly and white.
O dead in the hedges, sleep ye well to-night!

III.—COMRADES: AN EPISODE

BEFORE, before he was aware
The ' Verey ' light had risen . . . on the air
It hung glistening. . . .

And he could not stay his hand
From moving to the barbed wire's broken strand.
A rifle cracked.

He fell.

Night waned. He was alone. A heavy shell
Whispered itself passing high, high overhead.
His wound was wet to his hand: for still it bled
On to the glimmering ground.

Then with a slow, vain smile his wound he
bound,

Knowing, of course, he'd not see home again—
Home whose thought he put away.

His men
Whispered: " Where's Mister Gates ?" " Out
on the wire."

" I'll get him," said one. . . .

Dawn blinked, and the fire

Of the Germans heaved up and down the line.
“Stand to!”

Too late! “I’ll get him.” “O the swine!
When we might get him in yet safe and whole!”
“Corporal didn’t see ’un fall out on patrol,
Or he’d ’a got ’un.” “Sssh!”

“No talking there.”

A whisper: “’A went down at the last flare.”
Meanwhile the Maxims toc-toc-tocked; their
swish

Of bullets told death lurked against the wish.
No hope for him!

His corporal, as one shamed,
Vainly and helplessly his ill-luck blamed.

* * * * *

Then Gates slowly saw the morn
Break in a rosy peace through the lone thorn
By which he lay, and felt the dawn-wind pass
Whispering through the pallid, stalky grass
Of No-Man’s Land. . . .

And the tears came
Scaldingly sweet, more lovely than a flame.
He closed his eyes: he thought of home
And grit his teeth. He knew no help could
come. . . .

* * * * *

The silent sun over the earth held sway,
Occasional rifles cracked and far away

A heedless speck, a 'plane, slid on alone,
Like a fly traversing a cliff of stone.

"I must get back," said Gates aloud, and
heaved

At his body. But it lay bereaved
Of any power. He could not wait till night . . .
And he lay still. Blood swam across his sight.
Then with a groan:

"No luck ever! Well, I must die alone."

Occasional rifles cracked. A cloud that shone,
Gold-rimmed, blackened the sun and then was
gone. . . .

The sun still smiled. The grass sang in its play.
Someone whistled: "Over the hills and far
away."

Gates watched silently the swift, swift sun
Burning his life before it was begun. . . .

Suddenly he heard Corporal Timmins' voice:

"Now then,

'Urry up with that tea."

"Hi Ginger!" "Bill!" His men!
Timmins and Jones and Wilkinson (the 'bard'),
And Hughes and Simpson. It was hard
Not to see them: Wilkinson, stubby, grim,
With his "No, sir," "Yes, sir," and the slim

Simpson: "Indeed, sir?" (while it seemed he winked
Because his smiling left eye always blinked)
And Corporal Timmins, straight and blonde
and wise,
With his quiet-scanning, level, hazel eyes;
And all the others . . . tunics that didn't fit . . .
A dozen different sorts of eyes. O it
Was hard to lie there! Yet he must. But no:
"I've got to die. I'll get to them. I'll go."

Inch by inch he fought, breathless and mute,
Dragging his carcass like a famished brute. . . .
His head was hammering, and his eyes were dim;
A bloody sweat seemed to ooze out of him
And freeze along his spine. . . . Then he'd lie
still
Before another effort of his will
Took him one nearer yard.

* * * * *

The parapet was reached.
He could not rise to it. A lookout screeched:
"Mr. Gates!"

Three figures in one breath
Leaped up. Two figures fell in toppling death;
And Gates was lifted in. "Who's hit?" said he.
"Timmins and Jones." "Why did they that
for me?"—

I'm gone already!" Gently they laid him prone
And silently watched.

He twitched. They heard him moan
"Why for me?" His eyes roamed round, and
none replied.

"I see it was alone I should have died."

They shook their heads. Then, "Is the doctor
here?"

"He's coming, sir; he's hurryin', no fear."

"No good. . . .

Lift me." They lifted him.
He smiled and held his arms out to the dim,
And in a moment passed beyond their ken,
Hearing him whisper, "O my men, my men!"

IN HOSPITAL, LONDON,
Autumn, 1915.

IV.—BEHIND THE LINES: NIGHT, FRANCE

At the cross-roads I halt
And stand stock-still. . . .
The linked and flickering constellations climb
Slowly the spread black heaven's immensity.

The wind wanders like a thought at fault.

Within the close-shuttered cottage nigh
I hear—while its fearful, ag'd master sleeps like
 the dead—
A slow clock chime
With solemn thrill
The most sombre hour of time,
And see stand in the cottage's garden chill
The two white crosses, one at each grave's
 head. . . .

O France, France, France ! I loved you, love
 you still;
But, Oh ! why took you not my life instead ?

V.—AT THE WARS

Now that I am ta'en away,
And may not see another day,
What is it to my eye appears ?
What sound rings in my stricken ears ?
Not even the voice of any friend
Or eyes beloved-world-without-end,
But scenes and sounds of the countryside
In far England across the tide:
An upland field when Spring's begun,
Mellow beneath the evening sun. . . .
A circle of loose and lichened wall
Over which seven red pines fall. . . .
An orchard of wizen blossoming trees
Wherein the nesting chaffinches
Begin again the self-same song
All the late April day-time long. . . .
Paths that lead a shelving course
Between the chalk scarp and the gorse
By English downs; and, O ! too well
I hear the hidden, clanking bell

Of wandering sheep . . . I see the brown
Twilight of the huge empty down. . . .
Soon blotted out ! for now a lane
Glitters with warmth of May-time rain,
And on a shooting briar I see
A yellow bird who sings to me.

O yellow-hammer, once I heard
Thy yaffle when no other bird
Could to my sunk heart comfort bring;
But now I would not have thee sing,
So sharp thy note is with the pain
Of England I may not see again !
Yet sing thy song: there answereth
Deep in me a voice which saith:
*“ The gorse upon the twilit down,
The English loam so sunset brown,
The bowed pines and the sheep-bells’ clamour,
The wet, lit lane and the yellow-hammer,
The orchard and the chaffinch song,
Only to the Brave belong.
And he shall lose their joy for aye
If their price he cannot pay,
Who shall find them dearer far
Enriched by blood after long War.”*

VI.—OUT OF TRENCHES: THE BARN, TWILIGHT

IN the raftered barn we lie,
Sprawl, scrawl postcards, laugh and speak—
Just mere men a trifle weary,
Worn in heart, a trifle weak:
Because alway
At close of day
Thought steals to England far away. . . .
“ Alf !” “ O ay.”
“ Gi’ us a tune, mate.” “ Well, wot say ?”
“ Swipe ‘ The Policeman’s ’Oliday ’ . . .”
“ *Tiddle-iddle-um-tum,*
Tum-TUM.”

Sprawling on my aching back,
Think I nought; but I am glad—
Dear, rare lads of pick and pack !
Aie me too ! I’m sad . . . I’m sad :
Some must die
(Maybe I):
O pray it take them suddenly !

“ Bill !” “ Wot ho !”

“ Concertina : let it go—

‘ If you were the only girl.’ ” “ Cheero !”

“ *If you were the Only Girl.*”

Damn. ‘ Abide with Me . . . ’ Not now !—

Well . . . if you must : just your way.

It racks me till the tears nigh flow.

The tune see-saws. I turn, I pray

Behind my hand,

Shaken, unmanned,

In groans that God may understand :

Miracle !

“ Let, let them all survive this hell.”

Hear ‘ Trumpeter, what are you sound-
ing ? ’ swell.

(My God ! I guess indeed too well :

The broken heart, eyes front, proud knell !)

Grant but mine sound with their farewell.

“ *It’s the Last Post I’m sounding.*”

VII.—BATTERY MOVING UP TO A NEW POSITION
FROM REST CAMP: DAWN

Not a sign of life we rouse
In any square close-shuttered house
That flanks the road we amble down
Toward far trenches through the town.

The dark, snow-slushy, empty street. . . .
Tingle of frost in brow and feet. . . .
Horse-breath goes dimly up like smoke.
No sound but the smacking stroke

Of a sergeant flings each arm
Out and across to keep him warm,
And the sudden splashing crack
Of ice-pools broken by our track.

More dark houses, yet no sign
Of life. . . . An axle's creak and whine. . . .
The splash of hooves, the strain of trace. . . .
Clatter: we cross the market place.

Deep quiet again, and on we lurch
Under the shadow of a church:
Its tower ascends, fog-wreathed and grim;
Within its aisles a light burns dim. . . .

When, marvellous ! from overhead,
Like abrupt speech of one deemed dead,
Speech-moved by some Superior Will,
A bell tolls thrice and then is still.

And suddenly I know that now
The priest within, with shining brow,
Lifts high the small round of the Host.
The server's tingling bell is lost

In clash of the greater overhead.
Peace like a wave descends, is spread,
While watch the peasants' reverent eyes. . . .

The bell's boom trembles, hangs, and dies.

O people who bow down to see
The Miracle of Calvary,
The bitter and the glorious,
Bow down, bow down and pray for us.

Once more our anguished way we take
Toward our Golgotha, to make
For all our lovers sacrifice.

Again the troubled bell tolls thrice.

And slowly, slowly, lifted up
Dazzles the overflowing cup.

O worshipping, fond multitude,
Remember us too, and our blood.

Turn hearts to us as we go by,
Salute those about to die,
Plead for them, the deep bell toll:
Their sacrifice must soon be whole.

Entreat you for such hearts as break
With the premonitory ache
Of bodies, whose feet, hands, and side,
Must soon be torn, pierced, crucified.

Sue for them and all of us
Who the world over suffer thus,
Who have scarce time for prayer indeed,
Who only march and die and bleed.

* * * * *

The town is left, the road leads on,
Bluely glaring in the sun,
Toward where in the sunrise gate
Death, honour, and fierce battle wait.

VIII.—EVE OF ASSAULT: INFANTRY GOING
DOWN TO TRENCHES

DOWNWARD slopes the wild red sun.
We lie around a waiting gun;
Soon we shall load and fire and load.
But, hark! a sound beats down the road.

“ ‘Ello! wot’s up?” “Let’s ’ave a look!”
“Come on, Ginger, drop that book!”
“Wot an ’ell of bloody noise!”
“It’s the Yorks and Lincs, meboys!”

So we crowd: hear, watch them come—
One man drubbing on a drum,
A crazy, high mouth-organ blowing,
Tin cans rattling, cat-calls, crowing. . . .

And above their rhythmic feet
A whirl of shrilling loud and sweet,
Round mouths whistling in unison;
Shouts: “ ‘O’s goin’ to out the ’Un?”

“ Back us up, mates !” “ Gawd, we will !”

“ ’Eave them shells at Kaiser Bill !”

“ Art from Lancashire, melad ?”

“ Gi’ ’en a cheer, boys; make ’en glad.”

“ ’Ip ’urrah !” “ Give Fritz the chuck.”

“ Good ol’ bloody Yorks !” “ Good-luck !”

“ Cheer !”

I cannot cheer or speak
Lest my voice, my heart must break.

IX.—THE ASSAULT

NOTE.—(1) "Zero" is the hour agreed upon by the Staff when the infantry are to go over the parapet and advance to the assault. (2) Guns are said to "lift" when, after pounding the front line of the enemy, they lengthen their range and set up a barrier of fire behind his front line to prevent supports moving up. Our infantry then advance.

THE beating of the guns grows louder.

"*Not long, boys, now.*"

My heart burns whiter, fearfuller, prouder.

Hurricanes grow

As guns redouble their fire.

Through the shaken periscope peeping,

I glimpse their wire:

Black earth, fountains of earth rise, leaping,

Spouting like shocks of meeting waves.

Death's fountains are playing.

Shells like shrieking birds rush over;

Crash and din rises higher.

A stream of lead raves

Over us from the left . . . (we safe under cover !)

Crash ! Reverberation ! Crash !

Acrid smoke billowing. Flash upon flash.

Black smoke drifting. The German line
Vanishes in confusion, smoke. Cries, and cry
Of our men, "*Gah, yer swine!*
Ye're for it," die
In a hurricane of shell.

One cry:
"*We're comin' soon! look out!*"
There is opened hell
Over there; fragments fly,
Rifles and bits of men whirled at the sky:
Dust, smoke, thunder! A sudden bout
Of machine guns chattering . . .
And redoubled battering,
As if in fury at their daring! . . .

No good staring.

Time soon now . . . home . . . house on a sunny
hill . . .

Gone like a flickered page:
Time soon now . . . zero . . . will engage. . . .

A sudden thrill—
"Fix bayonets!"
Gods! we have our fill
Of fear, hysteria, exultation, rage,
Rage to kill.

My heart burns hot, whiter and whiter,
Contracts tighter and tighter,
Until I stifle with the will
Long forged, now used
(Though utterly strained)—
O pounding heart,
Baffled, confused,
Heart panged, head singing, dizzily pained—
To do my part.

Blindness a moment. Sick.
There the men are !
Bayonets ready: click !
Time goes quick;
A stumbled prayer . . . somehow a blazing star
In a blue night . . . where ?
Again prayer.
The tongue trips. Start:
How's time ? Soon now. Two minutes or less.
The gun's fury mounting higher . . .
Their utmost. I lift a silent hand. Unseen
I bless
Those hearts will follow me.
And beautifully,
Now beautifully my will grips.
Soul calm and round and filmed and white !

A shout: " Men, no such order as retire "

I nod.

The whistle's 'twixt my lips . . .

I catch

A wan, worn smile at me.

Dear men !

The pale wrist-watch . . .

The quiet hand ticks on amid the din.

The guns again

Rise to a last fury, to a rage, a lust:

Kill ! Pound ! Kill ! Pound ! Pound !

Now comes the thrust !

My part . . . dizziness . . . will . . . but trust

These men. The great guns rise;

Their fury seems to burst the earth and skies !

They lift.

Gather, heart, all thoughts that drift;

Be steel, soul,

Compress thyself

Into a round, bright whole.

I cannot speak.

Time. Time !

I hear my whistle shriek,

Between teeth set;

I fling an arm up,

Scramble up the grime

Over the parapet !

I'm up. Go on.
Something meets us.
Head down into the storm that greets us.
A wail.
Lights. Blurr.
Gone.
On, on. Leăd. Leăd. Hail.
Spatter. Whirr! Whirr!
"*Toward that patch of brown;
Direction left.*" Bullets a stream.
Devouring thought crying in a dream.
Men, crumpled, going down. . . .
Go on. Go.
Deafness. Numbness. The loudening tornado.
Bullets. Mud. Stumbling and skating.
My voice's strangled shout:
"*Steady pace, boys!*"
The still light: gladness.
"*Look, sir. Look out!*"
Ha! ha! Bunched figures waiting.
Revolver levelled quick!
Flick! Flick!
Red as blood.
Germans. Germans.
Good! O good!
Cool madness.

X.—THE LAST MORNING

COME now, O Death,
While I am proud,
While joy and awe are breath,
And heart beats loud !

While all around me stand
Men that I love,
The wind blaes aloud, the grand
Sun wheels above.

Naked I stand to-day
Before my doom,
Welcome what comes my way,
Whatever come.

What is there more to ask
Than that I have ?—
Companions, love, a task,
And a deep grave !

Come then, Eternity,
If thou my lot;
Having been thus, I cannot be
As if I had not.

Naked I wait my doom !
Earth enough shroud !
Death, in thy narrow room
Man can lie proud !

XI.—FULFILMENT

Was there love once ? I have forgotten her.
Was there grief once ? grief yet is mine.
Other loves I have, men rough, but men who stir
More grief, more joy, than love of thee and thine.

Faces cheerful, full of whimsical mirth,
Lined by the wind, burned by the sun;
Bodies enraptured by the abounding earth,
As whose children we are brethren : one.

And any moment may descend hot death
To shatter limbs ! pulp, tear, blast
Beloved soldiers who love rough life and breath
Not less for dying faithful to the last.

O the fading eyes, the grimed face turned bony,
Oped mouth gushing, fallen head,
Lessening pressure of a hand shrunk, clammed,
and stony !

O sudden spasm, release of the dead !

Was there love once ? I have forgotten her.
Was there grief once ? grief yet is mine.
O loved, living, dying, heroic soldier,
All, all, my joy, my grief, my love, are thine !

THE DEAD

I.—THE BURIAL IN FLANDERS

(H. S. G., YPRES, 1916)

THROUGH the light rain I think I see them going,
Through the light rain under the muffled skies;
Across the fields a stealthy wet wind wanders,
The mist bedews their tunics, dizzies their brains.

Shoulder-high, khaki shoulder by shoulder,
They bear my Boy upon his last journey.
Night is closing. The wind sighs, ebbs, and
falters. . . .

They totter dreaming, deem they see his face.

Even as Vikings of old their slaughtered leader
Upon their shoulders, so now bear they on
All that remains of Boy, my friend, their leader,
An officer who died for them under the dawn.

O that I were there that I might carry,
Might share that bitter load in grief, in pride! . . .
I see upon bronze faces love, submission,
And a dumb sorrow for that cheerful Boy.

Now they arrive. The priest repeats the service.
The drifting rain obscures.

They are dispersed.
The dying sun streams out: a moment's radiance;
The still, wet, glistening grave; the trod sward
steaming.

* * * * *

Sudden great guns startle, echoing on the silence.
Thunder. Thunder.

HE HAS FALLEN IN BATTLE.

(O Boy! Boy!)

Lessening now. The rain

Patters anew. Far guns rumble and shudder
And night descends upon the desolate plain.

LAWFORD,
September, 1916.

II.—BOY

IN a far field, away from England, lies
A Boy I friended with a care like love;
All day the wide earth aches, the cold wind cries,
The melancholy clouds drive on above.

There, separate from him by a little span,
Two eagle cousins, generous, reckless, free,
Two Grenfells, lie, and my Boy is made man,
One with these elder knights of chivalry.

Boy, who expected not this dreadful day,
Yet leaped, a soldier, at the sudden call,
Drank as your fathers, deeper though than they,
The soldier's cup of anguish, blood, and gall,

Not now as friend, but as a soldier, I
Salute you fallen; for the Soldier's name
Our greatest honour is, if worthily
These wayward hearts assume and bear the same:

The Soldier's is a name none recognize,
Saving his fellows. Deeds are all his flower.
He lives, he toils, he suffers, and he dies,
And if not all in vain this is his dower:

The Soldier is the Martyr of a nation,
Expresses but is subject to its will;
His is the Pride ennobles Resignation,
As his the rebel Spirit-to-fulfil.

Anonymous, he takes his country's name,
Becomes its blindest vassal—though its lord
By force of arms; its shame is called his shame,
As its the glory gathered by his sword.

Lonely he is: he has nor friend nor lover,
Sith in his body he is dedicate. . . .
His comrades only share his life, or offer
Their further deeds to one more heart oblate.

Living, he's made an 'Argument Beyond'
For others' peace; but when hot wars have birth,
For all his brothers' safety becomes bond
To Fate or Whatsoever sways this Earth.

Dying, his mangled body, to inter it,
He doth bequeath him into comrade hands;
His soul he renders to some Captain Spirit
That knows, admires, pities, and understands!

All this you knew by that which doth reside
Deeper than learning; by apprehension
Of ancient, dark, and melancholy pride
You were a Soldier true, and died as one.

All day the cold wind cries, the clouds unroll;
But to the cloud and wind I cry, "Be still!"
What need of comfort has the heroic soul?
What soldier finds a soldier's grave is chill?

LAWFORD,
September, 1916.

III.—PLAINT OF FRIENDSHIP BY DEATH BROKEN

(R. P., Loos, 1915)

GOD, if Thou livest, Thine eye on me bend,
And stay my grief and bring my pain to end:
Pain for my lost, the deepest, rarest friend
Man ever had, whence groweth this despair.

I had a friend: but, O! he is now dead;
I had a vision: for which he has bled:
I had happiness: but it is fled.
God help me now, for I must needs despair.

His eyes were dark and sad, yet never sad;
In them moved sombre figures sable-clad;
They were the deepest eyes man ever had,
They were my solemn joy—now my despair.

In my perpetual night they on me look,
Reading me slowly; and I cannot brook
Their silent beauty, for nor crack nor nook
Can cover me but they shall find me there.

His face was straight, his mouth was wide yet
trim;

His hair was tangled black, and through its dim
Softness his perplexed hand would writhe and
swim—

Hands that were small on arms strong-knit
yet spare.

He stood no taller than our common span,
Swam but nor farther leaped nor faster ran;
I know him spirit now, who seemed a man.

God help me now, for I must needs despair.

His voice was low and clear, yet it could rise
And beat in indignation at the skies;
Then no man dared to meet his fire-filled eyes,
And even I, his own friend, did not dare.

With humorous wistfulness he spoke to us,
Yet there was something more mysterious,
Beyond his words or silence, glorious:

I know not what, but we could feel it there.

I mind now how we sat one winter night
While past his open window raced the bright
Snow-torrent golden in the hot firelight. . . .

I see him smiling at the streamered air.

I watched him to the open window go,
And lean long smiling, whispering to the snow,
Play with his hands amid the fiery flow
And when he turned it flamed amid his hair.

Without arose a sudden bell's huge clang
Until a thousand bells in answer rang
And midnight Oxford hummed and reeled and
sang
Under the whitening fury of the air.

His figure standing in the fiery room . . .
Behind him the snow seething through the
gloom . . .
The great bells shaking, thundering out their
doom . . .
Soft Fiery Snow and Night his being were.

Yet he could be simply glad and take his choice,
Walking spring woods, mimicking each bird
voice;
When he was glad we learned how to rejoice:
If the birds sing, 'tis to my spite they dare.

All women loved him, yet his mother won
His tenderness alone, for Moon and Sun
And Rain were for him sister, brother, loved one,
And in their life he took an equal share.

Strength he had, too; strength of unruined will
Buttressed his natural charity, and ill
Fared it with him who sought his good to kill:
He was its Prince and Champion anywhere.

Yet he had weakness, for he burned too fast;
And his unrecked-of body at the last
He in impatience on the bayonets cast,
Body whose spirit had outsoared them there.

I had a friend, but, O ! he is now dead.
Fate would not let me follow where he led.
In him I had happiness. But he is dead.
God help me now, for I must needs despair.

God, if Thou livest, and indeed didst send
Thine only Son to be to all a Friend,
Bid His dark, pitying eyes upon me bend,
And His hand heal, or *I must needs despair.*

IN HOSPITAL,
Autumn, 1915.

IV.—BY THE WOOD

How still the day is, and the air how bright !
A thrush sings and is silent in the wood ;
The hillside sleeps dizzy with heat and light ;
A rhythmic murmur fills the quietude ;
A woodpecker prolongs his leisured flight,
Rising and falling on the solitude.

But there are those who far from yon wood lie,
Buried within the trench where all were found.
A weight of mould oppresses every eye,
Within that cabin close their limbs are bound,
And there they rot amid the long profound,
Disastrous silence of grey earth and sky.

These once, too, rested where now rests but one,
Who scarce can lift his panged and heavy head,
Who drinks in grief the hot light of the sun,
Whose eyes watch dully the green branches
 spread,
Who feels his currents ever slower run,
Whose lips repeat a silent ' . . . Dead ! all dead !'

O youths to come shall drink air warm and
bright,
Shall hear the bird cry in the sunny wood,
All my Young England fell to-day in fight:
That bird, that wood, was ransomed by our
blood !

I pray you when the drum rolls let your mood
Be worthy of our deaths and your delight.

1916.

THE AFTERMATH

I.—AT THE EBB

ALONE upon the monotonous ocean's verge
I take my stand, and view with heavy eye
The grey wave rise. I hear its sullen surge,
Its bubbling rush and sudden downward sigh. . . .

My friends are dead . . . there fades from me the
light
Of her warm face I loved; upon me stare
In the dull noon or dearest hour of night
The smiling lips and chill eyes of Despair.

A light wind blows. . . . I hear the low wave
steal
In and collapse like a despondent breath.
My life has ebbed: I neither see nor feel:
I am suspended between life and death.

Again the wave caves in. O, I am worn
Smoother than any pebble on the beach!
I would dissolve to that whence I was born,
Or alway bide beyond the long wave's reach.

O Will, thou only strengthener of man's heart
When all is gone—love and the love of friends,
When even Earth's comfort has become a part
Of that futility nor breaks nor mends:

Strengthen me now against these utmost wrongs;
Stay my wrecked spirit within thy control,
That men may find some fury in my songs
Which, like strong wine, shall fortify the soul.

BENEATH GOLD CAP,
June, 1916.

II.—ALONE

THE grey wind and the grey sea
Tossing under the long grey sky. . . .
My heart is lonelier than the wind;
My heart is emptier than the sky,
And beats more heavily
Than the cold surge beneath the gull,
Wheeling with his reiterant cry
Of loneliness. . . . All, all is lone:
Alone ! . . .

And so am I.

III.—THANKSGIVING

AMAZEMENT fills my heart to-night,
Amaze and awful fears;
I am a ship that sees no light,
But blindly onward steers.

Flung toward heaven's toppling rage,
Sunk between steep and steep,
A lost and wondrous fight I wage
With the embattled deep.

I neither know nor care at length
Where drives the storm about;
Only I summon all my strength
And swear to ride it out.

Yet give I thanks; despite these wars,
My ship—though blindly blown,
Long lost to sun or moon or stars—
Still stands up alone.
I need no trust in borrowed spars;
My strength is yet my own.

IV.—ANNIHILATED

UPON the sweltering sea's enormous round,
As smoke, adazzle, brown and brown and gold,
A hushed light falls. . . .

Then clouds without a sound
Darken the sea within their curtain's fold.

The sombre clouds through which the sick sun
climbs

Smoke slowly on. Below there is no breath.

The long black beach turns livid.

The sea chimes.

I taste the fulness of my spirit's death.

V.—SHUT OF NIGHT

THE sea darkens. Waves roar and rush.
The wind rises. The last birds haste.
One star over eve's bitter flush
Spills on the spouting waste.

Loud and louder the darkened sea.
The wind shrills on a monotone.
Sky and deep, wrecked confusedly,
Travail and cry as one.

Long I look on the deepening sky,
The chill star, the forlorn sea breaking;
For what does my spirit cry ?
For what is my heart so aching ?

Is it home ? but I have no home.
Is it tears ? but I no more weep.
Is it love ? love went by dumb.
Is it sleep ? but I would not sleep.

Must I fare, then, in fear and fever
On a journey become thrice far—
Whose sun has gone down for ever,
Whose night brings no guiding star ?

The wind roars, and an ashen beam
Waving up shrinks away in haste.
The waves crash. The star's trickling gleam
Travels the warring waste.

I look up. In the windy height
The lone orb, serene and afar,
Shakes with excess of her light. . . .

Beauty, be thou my star !

VI.—THE FULL HEART

ALONE on the shore in the pause of the night-
time

I stand and I hear the long wind blow light;
I view the constellations quietly, quietly burning;
I hear the wave fall in the hush of the night.

Long after I am dead, ended this bitter journey,
Many another whose heart holds no light
Shall your solemn sweetness, hush, awe, and
comfort,

O my companions, Wind, Waters, Stars, and
Night.

NEAR GOLD CAP,
1916.

VII.—SONNET: OUR DEAD

THEY have not gone from us. O no! they are
The inmost essence of each thing that is
Perfect for us; they flame in every star;
The trees are emerald with their presences.
They are not gone from us; they do not roam
The flaw and turmoil of the lower deep,
But have now made the whole wide world their
home,
And in its loveliness themselves they steep.

They fail not ever; theirs is the diurn
Splendour of sunny hill and forest grave;
In every rainbow's glittering drop they burn;
They dazzle in the massed clouds' architrave;
They chant on every wind, and they return
In the long roll of any deep blue wave.

VIII.—DELIVERANCE

Out of the Night ! out of the Night I come :
Free at last : the whole world is my home :
I have lost self : I look not on myself again,
But if I do I see a man among men.

Out of the Night ! out of the Night, O Flesh :
Soul I know not from Body within thy mesh :
Accepting all that is, I cannot divide the same :
I accept the smoke because I accept the flame.

Out of the Night ! out of the Night, O Friends :
O all my dead, think ye our friendship ends ?
Harold, Kenneth, Dick, many hearts that were
true,
While I breathe breath, I am breathing you.

Out of the Night ! out of the Night, O Power :
Many a fight to be won, many an awful hour ;
Many an hour to wish death ere I go to death,
Many an hour to bless breath ere I cease from
breath.

Out of the Night ! out of the Night, O Soul:
Give thanks to the Night: Night and Day are
the Whole.

I count mere life-breath nothing now I know
Life's worth
Lies all in spending ! that known, love Life and
Earth.

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THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
PUBLISHED WEEKLY
CHICAGO, ILL., U.S.A.

Subscription price, Five Dollars per Annum in Advance.
Single Copies, Fifteen Cents.

Entered as Second-Class Matter, May 2, 1882.
Postpaid.

Acceptance for mailing at special rate of postage provided for in
Act of October 3, 1917, authorized on July 16, 1918.

Postage paid at Chicago, Ill., and at additional mailing offices.
Postmaster: Send address changes in this journal to THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, 535 N. Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.

Copyright, 1919, by American Medical Association.

Printed at the Chicago Press and Publishing Co., Chicago, Ill.

Volume 17, Number 1, January 7, 1919.

Published by the American Medical Association, 535 N. Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.

Subscription price, Five Dollars per Annum in Advance.

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